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## ***I, Daniel Blake* (2016): Vulnerability, Care, and Citizenship in Austerity Politics**

### **Abstract**

This article offers a reading of Ken Loach's 2016 film, *I, Daniel Blake* – a fictionalised account of experiences of the UK welfare system in conditions of austerity. We consider, firstly, the significant challenge that the film poses to dominant figurations of welfare recipients under austerity, through a focus on vulnerability *to* state processes. We follow with a reading of some of the film's interventions in relation to reciprocity, drawing on the important trajectories of care, community, and resistance that the film renders visible through the collective stories of the major characters. Finally, we conclude with reflections on citizenship, subject narratives, and alternative imaginaries of 'deservingness.'. Our article offers an 'against the grain' reading (hooks, 1996; Wearing 2013) of the film, highlighting some of the radical possibilities of the more minor moments, character arcs, and subject positionalities within the film's central narrative of Daniel's experiences in the shadow of the steadily crumbling welfare state.

### **Keywords**

Austerity, Care, Citizenship, Film, Vulnerability, Welfare

## **Introduction: Reading *I, Daniel Blake***

*I, Daniel Blake* was released in 2016 to both widespread critical acclaim and considerable derision.<sup>1</sup> Like much of director Ken Loach's earlier work, the film was widely represented as a *political* intervention, this time into the effects of the current dismantling of the UK welfare system under austerity. Our reading of the film arose from our shared research interests in the possibilities and limitations of representative and discursive framings within UK austerity politics, and the uneven material, cultural, and political effects of such framings. Moreover, we shared a sense that the film's fictionalised amalgamation of experiences of the welfare system in conditions of austerity provides a vital portrayal of their day-to-day impact for those making, or seeking to make, claims to the state due to experiences of unemployment, disability, and illness.

The attention afforded to *I, Daniel Blake* on its release – by the media, but also within policy settings – was largely unprecedented. The film appeared within a period of intensified cultural and televisual focus on the everyday experiences and personal stories of both real and fictional benefit claimants – with many programmes reproducing damaging figurations of welfare recipients, such as the 'benefit scrounger' (Garthwaite, 2011; Valentine and Harris, 2014), the 'welfare dependent' 'skiver' (Jensen, 2014), and the 'chav mum' (Tyler, 2008). Central to both the behavioural and cultural logics of austerity, and the circulations of such logics within the proliferating genre of austerity-themed TV – dubbed 'poverty porn' by many critics (Jensen, 2014; Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015) – has been the notion of *cultural poverty*. This implies that structural and material inequalities are sustained intergenerationally through cultural and familial behaviours, values, and norms (Jensen, 2014; Lehtonen, 2018; Wiggan, 2012). The increasing discursive designation of poverty to the cultural and familial spheres has, in turn,

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<sup>1</sup> Palme D'Or 2016, BAFTA – Best British Film 2017, and Cesar Award 2017.

helped justify the raft of austerity measures since 2010 (Gedalof, 2018). These have included significant cuts to public spending, welfare ‘reform’, and intensified conditionality in relation to state benefit and housing provision.

Because many of these programmes have treated claimants with suspicion and derision, / *Daniel Blake*’s broadly sympathetic portrayal of benefit claimants stood outside of much of this programming and the discourses of cultural poverty sustained within it. It is within this context that the film generated such significant public debate, particularly in relation to the *truthfulness* of its narratives, further highlighting the atypical representations it offers within the broader narrative possibilities of the austerity moment.<sup>2</sup> Ken Loach himself has defended his research for the fictionalised portrayal as being as ‘rigorous as any piece of journalism’ (Seymour, 2017), and these claims to authenticity are also sustained in the film’s visual and production qualities – akin to many of Loach’s other films, such as the 1966 *Cathy Come Home*. The scripted and visual realism of the film, thus, contributed to its takeup. While we recognise these as cinematic conventions, it is important to emphasise at the outset that we broadly align our analysis with the view that the film’s portrayal of the daily struggle of dealing with welfare agencies is *not* ‘absurdly romantic’, ‘unfair’, or ‘implausible’, as alleged by some of those critical of it.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, we remain cautious of the film’s representational capacity within broader austerity discourses that have sought to mark deserving and undeserving subjects of state support – echoing the long-standing history of such a separation within UK social policy

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst in this article we situate austerity as a specific cultural and political turn in recent UK politics, we recognise the problem of presenting the current moment as one of ‘extraordinary crisis’ (Brah et. al. 2015, p.1), when considering the unequal impacts of austerity as a ‘new form of “old” poverty’ (Evans, 2015, p.147) may be preferable.

<sup>3</sup> Toby Young, in a review in *The Daily Mail*, called the film ‘absurdly romantic’ and ‘implausible’ (Steel, 2016); and both former Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith and Damian Green, suggested the film was ‘unfair’ in its portrayal of jobcentre employees (Ferguson 2016; Watts, 2016).

discourse (Gedalof, 2018; Pemberton et al., 2016; Wiggan, 2012) – and the sustained racialised and gendered aspects of this framing within the film, particularly in the character journeys of China, and Katie and her children. We wonder, specifically, whether the *narrative economies* of austerity politics, which the film both draws upon and contributes to, in some ways limit and condition the stories it can tell. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2004) use of 'affective economies', and Clare Hemmings's (2011) reading of intertextual feminist storytelling, our conception of 'narrative economies' indicates that narratives do not originate in particular representational objects, but instead circulate, and are reiterated, between them. Cultural objects, such as *I, Daniel Blake*, become one node within multiple narrative economies, rather than the origin or destination of the narratives examined here. In this way, we question whether the underpinning cultural and political logics of (un)deservingness, and the common figuration of benefit claimants as singularly dependent and irresponsible – both central to austerity's cultural and political logics – are necessarily overcome in a film that in many ways draws and relies upon the narrative economies of a representational genre that has so consistently produced benefit claimants as *objects* of debate and derision. In emphasising the ubiquity of stigmatising representations of benefit claimants under austerity, our use of 'narrative economies' follows Sadie Wearing's (2013) consideration of the cultural work that representations do in shaping how austerity is 'imagined, understood and negotiated in the public sphere' (Ibid., p.316).

As such, our reading of the film follows two related questions. Firstly; why is it that Daniel's story must be centred within the film (in both title and narrative) – what kinds of political positionalities under austerity politics does this choice of protagonist avow and disavow? And secondly; what would it be to read the film against its grain and title as the singular story of Daniel Blake – what trajectories of care, community, and resistance might the film's characters and narratives mark as possible in such a reading?

Alongside Daniel's titular narrative, we focus on reading the film's seemingly minor moments and character stories – asking whether the film's title, and emphasis on the decline of Daniel's health, might distract from moments of more radical intervention within these *other* stories. In this way, we highlight moments within *I, Daniel Blake* that offer 'intermittent, partial and fragmentary glimpse[s]' (Wearing, 2013, p.320) through which other narratives and other subjects of austerity might be centred. Without suggesting that such moments resolve the ambivalent conclusion of the film, our reading serves to highlight its complexity – which both critical and favourable responses have tended to under-emphasise<sup>4</sup> – although of course there are also exceptions.<sup>5</sup> It is our sense that such readings become even more vital within the narrative economies of austerity, precisely because such minor, everyday moments of care, resistance, and community are disavowed in dominant narratives about benefit claimants. By reading *I, Daniel Blake* 'against the grain' (hooks, 1996; Wearing, 2013), we also consider the possibility of ambivalent or 'oppositional' (hooks, 1996) audience attachments to its narratives, and thereby hold open the possibility of multiple viewer engagements within a context that has otherwise tended to include a rather circumscribed set of critiques.

In what follows, we examine the questions of vulnerability, care, and citizenship within austerity politics as they appear in, and emerge from, the narratives of *I, Daniel Blake*. We focus not only on the story of the film's protagonist Daniel – an older white man who finds himself at the mercy of the benefits system after a recent heart attack that renders him unable to work – but also those of Daniel's friends: Katie, a young white single mother of two, recently moved up to Newcastle by her London council, and China, Daniel's younger, male, black neighbour. We consider, firstly, the significant challenge that *I Daniel Blake* poses to dominant figurations of disabled and unemployed people under austerity, through a focus on the vulnerability they

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<sup>4</sup> As well as the reviews referenced above, see Smith (2016), VandenBosch (2017), and Wilde (2017).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Allen (2017) and Scott Paul (2016).

experience to state processes. We follow with a reading of some of the film's interventions in regards to care and reciprocity in the less-centred storylines, and conclude with reflections on citizenship, subject narratives, and alternative imaginaries of 'deservingness.'

### **Vulnerability to the State**

In the opening scene for *I, Daniel Blake*, a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) takes place between Daniel, a carpenter and carer, off work due to a recent heart attack, and a 'healthcare professional – hired by the Department of Work and Pensions.' From behind a black screen, we hear the audio of a series of increasingly irrelevant questions about Daniel's 'capacity' to perform daily tasks, few of which capture either the effects, or temporality, of his condition. As Daniel becomes frustrated with the interview, it becomes clear that the restrictions on working experienced by someone with his heart condition will not be captured by the assessment. As the camera focuses for the first time with a close up of Daniel's despondent face, his frustrated, if humorous, responses introduce the audience to the early stages of a story familiar to the austerity moment – one in which the process of the disability assessment itself produces, and is seemingly designed to produce, conditions in which his health deteriorates.<sup>6</sup>

Other early scenes in the film present Daniel's engagements with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) as curious, if naive. He spends an afternoon waiting on hold to talk to someone about his failed assessment, and when he finally hears a human voice, asks if the call centre operator can 'hand the phone over' to the decision maker, signalling his anachronistic understanding of outsourced call centres. In the scene in which Daniel meets Katie and her family, a long shot frames him walking down to the crowded jobcentre, where he receives jargon-heavy instructions from a staff member. Attempting to bring 'perspective' to a situation

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<sup>6</sup> The film's portrayal of the WCA is especially significant given that disabled people have been disproportionately affected by UK austerity policies (Goodley et al., 2014; Shildrick, 2015).

that sees Katie sanctioned for being late to her interview, Daniel draws members of the public into the interaction – subsequently deemed a ‘scene’ by security staff.<sup>7</sup> Daniel's incredulity at his and Katie's treatment at the jobcentre sets the expectation that both Daniel's and the audience's understandings of fairness in situations of clear-cut need will soon be tested.

Through the initially farcical and increasingly harrowing story of Daniel Blake and his cruelly concluded quest to be recognised as deserving of Employment Support Allowance (ESA), both Daniel's and the viewers' imaginations of the care, support, and responsibilities of the current UK welfare state are placed in question. Through *I, Daniel Blake* as a window into the daily bureaucratic workings of the UK welfare system for those seeking disability and unemployment benefits, the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) inherent in the belief that the welfare system *will* care for us in times of temporally experienced illness or need becomes visible. Unbeknownst to Daniel, the frustrating experience of the WCA is only the first of the many problems that he will face in this regard. From the vantage point of a previously consistently employed, and recently disabled, citizen, this role of the UK welfare state in fairly providing care in moments of differentiated vulnerability becomes an increasingly nostalgic falsehood – although perhaps this falsehood only registers as a *surprise* for viewers who, akin to Daniel, have no prior experience of engaging with the welfare system. It is important to note here, then, that our positioning of the film's audience as *sharing* Daniel's unfamiliarity with these processes, rather than recognising them as always already unlikely, highlights that this scene is likely to produce different points of affective identification for those who have undergone or are undergoing similar experiences. Indeed, it seems that much of the film's narrative drive relies on the audience sharing the

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<sup>7</sup> Sanctioning removes welfare support for extended periods should recipients not attend interviews or in other ways violate their ‘Claimant Commitments’ (Gov.uk, ‘Jobseeker's Allowance [JSA]’, <https://www.gov.uk/jobseekers-allowance/your-jsa-interview>, last accessed 3 November 2017). The practice has received widespread criticism, especially for the roll-on effects of sanctions imposed over minor infringements (Cowburn, 2015).



bewilderment of Daniel – rather than, for example, Katie’s knowing frustration, or China’s cynicism, as we discuss further below.

Lauren Berlant describes a relationship of cruel optimism as attaching to objects (institutions, people, ideas) as promising, in order to ‘guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something’ (2011, p.48), when the participation in such attachments is itself damaging or prohibiting. Daniel Blake’s early engagements with the DWP – his calls for common sense, his requests for straightforward assistance in lodging his forms – mark his belief that this ‘ridiculousness’ preventing him from receiving disability benefits can be easily resolved. On the one hand, Daniel’s nostalgic belief that this is *only* ridiculousness could be seen as highlighting the sustained distinction between his UK context, with its continuing investments in a deteriorating welfare state, and the US context, in which Berlant identifies such investments as already and always ‘cruel.’ At the same time, Daniel is often unhearing of warnings that his attachment to such a resolution is a cruel one – ‘they’ve picked the wrong one if they think I’m gonna give up – I’m like a dog with a bone, me.’ As we follow Daniel’s journey, we become more aware that not only is this attachment to the process not ‘guaranteeing his survival’ (ibid., p.48), but it is also creating the conditions for the deterioration of his health.

Significantly, the film makes visible these experiences of vulnerability to the benefits system, and the state more broadly, in ways that have been rarely explored in wider interpretations of austerity measures. Having ‘demanded’ an appeal date by literally scribing ‘I Daniel Blake demand my appeal date before I starve’ on the side of the jobcentre wall, and been sanctioned for his refusal to participate in an arbitrary paper trail to find employment he is not well enough to undertake, it appears Daniel has nothing left to do but wait. We witness this waiting time as not a suspension of time at all – Daniel’s health is rapidly deteriorating. The conditions of his illness exacerbated by the process to which he is exposed – sanctioned and unable to pay for

heating, Daniel waits in his cold flat. While it is implied early in the film that Daniel could recover from his illness *with* rest and time, Daniel's experience of such time is, conversely, presented as a significantly embodied process through which his ill health is exacerbated, and the duration of his life impacted. His story, thus, raises an important intervention in thinking of disability as experienced *in and through* temporal and relational interactions with formal modes of support and care provided (or refused) by the state (Kafer, 2013). Daniel's fictionalised experience matches many real ones exposed in the austerity moment, with numerous critiques of the WCA suggesting that the conditions of the assessment and its outcomes are in themselves inducing worsening conditions of illness.<sup>8</sup>

Katie, who Daniel befriends after the 'scene' at the jobcentre, is sanctioned as well, while also struggling with the consequences of having been recently moved to Newcastle by her London council – a Local Authority practise that has increased in recent years particularly in London due to the combined effect of various austerity policies and growing private sector rents (Halpin, 2014; The Independent, 2015). As for Daniel, the costs and implications of both her move and sanctioning are felt *in the everyday*. After completing a shopping transaction at a corner store, a security guard stops Katie from exiting the shop. As the store manager removes a stolen a packet of sanitary pads, razors, and a deodorant from her bag, Katie begins to cry – her positioning within a frame of criminality pre-empted by the audience's view of her through the store's CCTV cameras throughout the shopping trip. The scene's opening shots through the security cameras could signal either (or both) Katie's anticipated criminality, or her violent subjugation *to* frames of criminality. In a moment of seeming benevolence, the store manager

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<sup>8</sup> The deaths associated with sanctioning and 'fit for work' outcomes have been compiled in the online Calum's List (Calum's List, <http://calumslit.org/>, last accessed 3 November 2017). In 2015 the DWP, in response to a Freedom of Information request, released the statistic that 2,380 people had died after being declared 'fit for work' between December 2011 and February 2014 (Butler, 2015).

then returns the items to her and sends her home, but as she tries to leave the security guard offers her an apology and an ambiguous offer of well-paid work for a 'nice girl.'

While primarily acting as the scene in which Katie is introduced to the possibility of sex work – a major plot development of the film – a minor reading of the scene reveals the process through which Katie's precarity is enacted. The effects of her sanctioning make it impossible for her to cover the costs of both food and basic hygiene items, and her choice to steal them opens her up to the risk of criminalisation – albeit a risk that does not materialise. Indeed, perhaps a benevolent response from the store manager is only possible because Katie's vulnerability *is* apprehended by the store manager – or, further, because her attempt to steal 'feminine' products, rather than the food, allows for a gendered and classed recognition of her attachment to notions of 'respectability' (Skeggs 1997, 2004) within this vulnerability. An intimate shot of Katie with the stolen contents of her bag resting on the table in front of her ashamed and worried face is followed by the store manager's paternal response, as he – now out of focus – watches over her in a way that mimics Daniel's watching over of Katie and her children. Despite this brief moment in which she is recognised as such, however, Katie's experience of being vulnerable *to* potential punishment and violence in this interaction is experienced because of, and through, the processes of being sanctioned and removed from previous modes of familial and social support in London.

Through Daniel's increasing ill health, and Katie's inability to take care of herself while her benefits are sanctioned, forms of vulnerability that materialise in and through their interactions with the benefits system are exposed. Indeed, the journeys of the two characters make visible experiences of precarity that are produced *through* the relational 'living on' (Shildrick, 2015; cf. Puar 2009) through a failing system of state support. It is in this important, and largely

unprecedented, framing that a different story of disability, poverty, and illness in austerity can be told.

### **Care, Normativity, and Reciprocity**

Katie and Daniel are preparing dinner together one evening, as Katie discusses the difficulty of finding work while caring for her children, Dylan and Daisy. Daniel offers – one of many he makes in the film – to pick the children up from school, and Katie is visibly touched. Daniel's kind interventions in regards to Dylan's behaviour – teaching him to whittle, asking him puzzling questions to maintain his attention – are also having an effect: we see a much calmer Dylan responding well to his archetypal paternalistic mode of support. After dinner, Katie, Daisy, and Daniel discuss his former partner, her implied mental illness, and the years that Daniel spent taking care of her until her death – the scene's affective charge amplified by the warm light in Katie's home, in contrast to the cold external shots of Newcastle that punctuate Daniel's story. As it becomes clear that Daniel was the primary carer for his partner – a role and a person to whom he was sincerely attached – the *relational* nature of care and support the film portrays, is made clear: 'She was crazy. Hard work. And I loved her to bits. I'm lost without her, really.' Daniel was, and remains, a carer, alongside his primary employment as a carpenter. It was, and is, hard work – but he is lost, or *undone*, by the absence of this relational experience.

Other early scenes in the film highlight the similarly paternal relationship that Daniel has to his neighbour China – agreeing to accept packages for China when he is at work and fondly chastising him about putting out the trash. China responds with playful indignation; Daniel pats him on the back and calls him 'son.' These moments of everyday intimacy and care – between Daniel and Katie and her children, and Daniel and China – seem, early in the film, to materialise as decidedly archetypal – potentially reproducing normatively gendered and racialised notions

of care and intimacy. We repeatedly witness the older white male Daniel taking care of his younger – feminised and racialised – friends, as well as nostalgically longing for the caring relationship he had to his partner. On the one hand, these investments to *normatively* organised intimacies are arguably reminiscent of Berlant's notion of 'the good life' – exemplary of what she sees as 'cruel optimism.' For her, it is precisely 'proximity to the fantasy life of normativity' that 'remains to animate living on, for some on the contemporary economic bottom' (2011, p.167). In the film we see Daniel – as well as, although perhaps to a lesser extent, Katie and China – attach to the very forms of intimacy that will (and do) fail to, more than intermittently, secure the basic resources required for their ordinary existence.

Later in the film, the effects of both Katie's and Daniel's sanctioning are being felt. After Katie has contacted the corner store security guard about his job offer, Daniel 'valiantly' attempts to stop her from engaging in sex work to pay her bills. As Katie stands in the far corner of the room, hastily trying to cover her body, Daniel's judgement is reinforced by the extended lingering point of view shot that remains fixed on Katie. But Daniel's attempt at rescue is unheeded – the first moment in which his fatherly regard for Katie and her children is resisted. Katie's choice of work is here juxtaposed with her intimate relationship with Daniel – or, viewed through a Berlantian frame, it is precisely Daniel's insistence on this attachment that jeopardises Katie's efforts to support herself and her children. Daniel's desire for Katie to leave sex work appears as a strong call for her to return to the frame of normative and respectable femininity – a call that endangers her ability to leave the abject poverty in which she finds herself after sanctioning.

Following their argument, Daniel sells most of his possessions to cover his bills, and waits alone in his unheated flat. Daisy comes to visit – but Daniel refuses to answer the door. In a reverse of their previous interactions, in which Daniel has provided food and warmth for the children, Daisy

has brought Daniel food. Daniel and his empty flat appear in focus through the letter box – seen for the first time from *Daisy's* point of view, rather than Daisy appearing as the object of Daniel's concern, as has been the case throughout the film so far.

In another scene, having been told he must complete his appeal form online, Daniel struggles to use the computer at the public library. While several members of the public try and help him, in the end a long shot frames Daniel alone and isolated in the busy common space. Later in the evening, he sits in his neighbour's small flat, where they chat with China's Chinese business partner, with whom he is starting a small-scale sneaker smuggling business. China then helps Daniel complete the form – another reversal of their earlier paternalistic relationship. Afterwards China tries to warn Daniel: 'Dan, they'll fuck you around. Make it as miserable as possible. No accident. That's the plan! I know dozens who've just given up.' The neighbours then share a wagon wheel and tea.

While earlier in the film Daniel is positioned in ways that we recognise as revealing of Berlant's proximities to normative intimacy – reinforced by the frequent shots of Katie and her children from Daniel's point of view – over the course of the film the reciprocal aspects of these caring relationships are established in different ways, and sometimes reversed. It is Daisy who feeds Daniel, in a reverse of their earlier visit to the food bank (where Daniel had been the one to help Katie as she – in what is perhaps one of the most difficult scenes in the film – desperately shoved cold baked beans into her mouth). It is Katie who walks with Daniel to his WCA appeal, visually mirroring the earlier scene in which Daniel walked her home after her sanctioning. And it is China who helps Daniel fill in the appeal forms. What does it do to show us these complex forms of vulnerability and enduring patterns of reciprocity – not limited to normatively recognisable forms – within the narrative economies of the austerity moment? How are common

figurations of dependent and autonomous, cared for and carer, citizens challenged in these minor glimpses of multi-directional systems of support?

We argue that in these moments, *I Daniel Blake* presents a complex relational approach to care and vulnerability, where the potential of such relational care practices to prevent flourishing through their attachments to normative 'good life' fantasies is somewhat complicated. As these representations of relational care move beyond the framing of certain subjects – Katie and China – as continuously needing care, and others – Daniel – as always providing it, we suggest they become vital representations in the austerity moment – precisely because benefit claimants tend to be simultaneously figured as both singularly dependent, and actively refusing of responsibility. Within these narrative economies, and against a political backdrop in which the state is decidedly revealed *not to care*, Daniel, China, Katie, and her children are sustaining relational and *reciprocal* care practices of their own. Indeed, in a film in which Daniel's belief in the state – as provider of care and support – is revealed as 'a farce', it seems vital that relational forms of care and support are, conversely, presented as enduring.

Perhaps, Daniel's inability to lock himself in following his defiant act of protest, and Daisy's persistence in returning the care that she has received from Daniel, act as a reminder of ways to resist subjectification to frames of 'dependency', without refusing the possibility of being vulnerable *to each other*. Daniel's caring relationship to his partner, similarly, holds a significance to *him* – the carer – in ways that challenge simplistic notions of dependency, as well as position *him* as vulnerable after the loss of this relationship. This makes both Daniel and Katie's stories significant interventions into current representations of poverty and disability – highlighting vulnerability as not a negative designation of lack, but a condition capable of mobilising and sustaining resistance to the conditions to which one is exposed (Butler, et al., 2016). Particularly for characters whose lives are touched by gendered figurations of

vulnerability, disability, and illness, the political ambivalence of seeking to maintain the kinds of independence that Daniel attempts to perform is clear.

Thus, while the film's title locates Daniel's defiant act of graffiti as its titular moment of resistance, a closer reading of the many, more minor, moments of care in the film might suggest different possibilities. Do such relational care practices, and their already gendered associations with the 'private' sphere, risk justifying neoliberal forms of distancing the state from obligations of care in the film? Is their potential functioning as a mere replacement for structural improvements sustained by these representations? Or, might they also challenge dominant representations of benefit claimants as singularly dependent and actively irresponsible, thus highlighting important practices of refusal to processes of precarisation and subjectification? We suggest that within the narrative economies of austerity, even the possibility of illuminating these tensions remains radical.

### **Citizenship, Refusal, and Resistance**

The final scene of *I Daniel Blake*, in which Katie reads the words Daniel had hoped to say at his appeal, is telling in its contrasting of Daniel's imagination of care and support from the state, and the care that became available to him instead. As Katie literally speaks *his* words at his funeral – one attended by many of the people that sustained his life over the last few months – Daniel makes a final claim on the state to have his needs recognised:

I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user. I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a thief... I paid my dues, never a penny short, and proud to do so... I look my neighbour in the eye, and help him if I can. I don't accept or seek charity. My name is Daniel Blake. I



am a man, not a dog. As such I demand you treat me with respect. I Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more, and nothing less.

Challenging his discursive positioning as a dependent, inactive subject, Daniel reminds us that he helps his neighbour, that he has paid his dues. Yet in the final reminder that Daniel does not 'accept or seek charity', is a man who *demand*s respect, and 'nothing more, and nothing less' than a citizen – that this alone entitles him to care – *I Daniel Blake* ends with a significantly ambivalent claim to the justice he has been denied so far. Indeed, Daniel's claim to *citizenship* and to having 'paid his dues' as the legitimate bases for his entitlement to support and care from the state could be read as undermining some of the ways in which the film, in more minor moments, not only complicates understandings of vulnerability, but also privileges the reciprocal care responsibilities that develop *between* subjects, over that of the state *to* its subjects.

In the film Daniel is surrounded by those who accept charity, those who have, perhaps, not always 'paid their dues', and those who engage in criminalised activities. The breaking down of Katie and Daniel's intimate relationship is directly linked to Daniel's judgement of Katie's choice to participate in sex work – for him, an obviously shameful and degrading subjection. Daniel's younger neighbour, China is, similarly, judged by Daniel for choosing to supplement the diminishing support extended to him by the welfare state – by starting an illegal sneaker smuggling venture. China – named in a way that curiously equates his subjectivity with his illegal activity, and one of the very few non-white characters in the film – chooses criminal activity rather than accepting the position into which he is forced by the state and his employers, mirroring the dynamics of Katie's engagement in sex work.

Leaving Daniel's judgement of Katie and China's activities aside for a moment, both of their choices could be read as refusals to accept *the terms which they are reduced to by the state*.

Tina Campt analyses images of black colonial subjects, focusing on *quotidian* practices ‘honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life’ (2017, p.4). For her, these practices materialise as resistance not in straightforward and easily recognisable ways, instead refusing the terms of the dispossession that makes them necessary in the first place. Through their defiant poses, practises of self-fashioning, and by *returning* the gaze of the camera, Campt’s subjects refuse the camera’s subjugating and colonising logics, engaging instead in ‘nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant’ (ibid., p.32). Katie and China also refuse the terms of the dispossession engendered by the austerity state’s dehumanising rationalities, choosing to engage in rather *creative* practices of survival instead. Similarly to Campt’s subjects, then, Katie and China return the gaze of both the uncaring state and the judgemental Daniel, ‘disrupt[ing] and disorder[ing] the terms of life imposed upon them’ (ibid., p.109). Daniel, on the other hand, initially reacts to his growing destitution and loneliness with passivity: refusing to socialise with his former workmates, insisting to China that he does not need help, and refusing to – both literally and figuratively – open the door to Daisy.

In contrast to Daniel’s individualistic claim to recognition and entitlement, Katie and China’s practices of refusal – not just of precarity and dispossession, but also of Daniel’s judgement – also have the potential to lay bare the differential relationships and access that they have to regimes of legitimacy, ‘deservingness’, and citizenship. Although we are not told much about the working lives of Katie and China prior to their relationships with Daniel, from the snippets of information present in the film it is clear that neither of them have experienced the kinds of extended periods of sustained and legitimate labour market activity that mark Daniel’s history. Their having, perhaps, not ‘paid their dues’, coupled with Daniel’s judgement of both of their alternative practices of survival, thus, stands in stark contrast to Daniel’s claim to state support on the basis of citizenship and a legitimate working-class subjectivity. Daniel remains refusing of

these different positionalities – even ones taken up by those who have supported him through his own journey – and, indeed, even in his death, as Katie's positionality is marginalised in the last moments of the film in the substituting of Daniel's prewritten words for anything she might have to say at the end of *her* journey.

Rather, it is Daniel who, as an older, white male, with a work history that makes him both legible and legitimate as a working-class subject, gets to make one last claim to the state. His claim rests on the assumption that his right to care and support from the state was *never* uncertain. There is nothing ambiguous about the life Daniel has lived – and it is through this claim to an untainted, *productive*, citizenship that the injustice of his treatment appears so clear. Thus, while presenting a radical story of relational care throughout the film, and suggesting potential alternative modes of refusal for the other characters, *I, Daniel Blake* ends with a claim to an isolated, independent imagination of 'a man', 'a citizen' seeking his right to support at the end of his life. And it is this ambivalent claim that leaves open the uneasy, nagging question of the film, and indeed, the cruelty of the austerity moment – would we recognise the injustice of the austerity framework here, were a different subject centred within it?

Perhaps different political possibilities would arise were we to read the film through these minor moments, as a story about Katie, a sex worker – whether we interpret her inhabiting this position ambivalently or determinedly – or about China, criminal sneaker smuggler – seemingly with no moral qualms about his choice of work. Here it is precisely the centrality of Daniel's – easily-approved of – life history in the film that masks the ways in which China and Katie's engagements in various creative practices of relational care, survival, and refusal constitute alternative modes of engaging with the totalising narratives of austerity. In contrast to the cruel optimism of Daniel's sustained attachment to a welfare state that no longer operates on the basis of reciprocity between the state and its subjects (Berlant, 2011), Katie and China's

narratives offer us a way of imagining alternative practices of survival, and possible alternative regimes of entitlement and citizenship in the face of an eroding state-citizen relationship. They also highlight the potential for developing different kinds of attachments in the film's audiences.

In this vein, perhaps Katie's reading of Daniel's words at his funeral is not as straightforward a moment as suggested above, but could instead be seen as a subversion or an appropriation of Daniel's original words for potentially more radical ends. After all, while the film arguably ends with a marginalisation of Katie's narrative, as Daniel's positionality as a political subject is affirmed by her reading of his words at the funeral, at the same time it ends *visually* on Katie. Indeed, we can read Katie's reappropriation of Daniel's words as an active questioning of the boundaries of citizenship, traditionally rooted in sustained forms of labour market participation, and in recognisable citizen-subjects with legitimate claims to rights and protection from the state.

Katie and China are not customers, clients, or service users, nor are they shirkers, scroungers, or thieves. They have looked their neighbour Daniel in the eye and helped him when they can. They accept charity, but also engage in creative practices of survival – they have paid their dues. Their names are Katie and China, and they demand your respect. They are citizens, nothing more, and nothing less.

In conditions where the state unilaterally withdraws support from (some of) its subjects, Katie and China's practices of survival, refusal, and 'paying one's dues' could here, in fact, be seen as constituting forms of citizenship. When 'entitlement' rings hollow because of the continued diminishing of what citizens are entitled *to*, it could be reformulated as entitlement to participate in these alternative forms of survival instead. Indeed, 'demanding respect' from a state that no longer respects you and your needs could consist precisely of refusing the very terms of this

crumbling relationship, as Katie and China arguably do in the film. Katie's recital of Daniel's words, together with the film's visual centring on *her* at the end, thus, perhaps allows for a reimagining of citizenship itself.

Returning to our introductory questions – why is it that Daniel's story must be centred within the film, and what would it be to read against the film's title as his story – we want to suggest that it is in the disavowed subjectivities of Katie and China that the film's narrative opens up for radical reimaginings of community, care, and resistance under conditions of austerity. Here it is important to point out that Daniel's defiant demand for recognition written across the jobcentre wall is not met with recognition from the state's agents. This moment, which appears as a pinnacle in the narrative arc of the film, is rendered less significant, even ironic, by the patronising tone of the police officers who caution Daniel in response to his act of civil disobedience. Reading the film against its title and grain in this way highlights Daniel's insistence on eroding modes of citizenship as the basis of state recognition and support as less resistant and heroic, even futile. Perhaps, then, the story was Katie's and China's all along.

### **Conclusion: Alternative Titles**

We – Katie, China, Daniel

...Expect Nothing

We began this article by insisting on *I, Daniel Blake* as a vital portrayal of everyday lives lived in the UK under conditions of increasing marginalisation, growing poverty, and austerity, particularly considering its status as one of the very few (perhaps only) sympathetic portrayals of benefit recipients available in UK mainstream cultural formations. Daniel's central story, in unprecedented ways, challenges conceptions of disability and precarity, portrayed as

experienced *through* and *as a result of* engagements with state welfare processes. At the same time, throughout this article we have offered a reading of the film's more minor moments, as we refuse to let go of our recognition of the limited possibilities of identification within the film, particularly within the broader narrative economies of austerity that have sought to distinguish between deserving and undeserving recipients of state support based on a narrative of self-inflicted, *cultural*, poverty. Indeed, struck by our initial attachment to Daniel's story, and simultaneous suspicion of the framing of Daniel as a *deserving* subject in contrast to others in the film, our reading of the 'partial and fragmentary glimpse[s]' (Wearing, 2013, p.320) of the narratives of Katie and China in this article points to the more radical positionalities made possible within the film's framing. This reading also highlights our refusal of the title's suggestion that the story is only Daniel Blake's.

Given the limited nature of the narrative economies of austerity, we wanted to consider whether more minor moments in the film allowed for other possibilities of identification. In this way, our seeking to decentre Daniel's story, and instead highlighting the possibly always 'cruel' nature of such claims in the austerity moment, might be considered an effort to account for the possibility of what hooks (1996) describes as *oppositional* viewing. In reading the film as a story about Katie, about China, and about the relational ties that all three characters build with each other, we wanted to explore what *I, Daniel Blake* might have to tell us about subjectivity in the austerity era – outside of the dual pressure to, on the one hand, demonise benefit recipients and to, on the other hand, represent them as uncomplicated *objects* of our sympathies. In working from a critical assumption of the intensification of welfare retrenchment and conditionality, we read the film as both a harsh reminder that in neoliberal austerity one might 'expect nothing' from the state, but that, nonetheless, alternative practices of legibility and relationality outside of the citizen-subject construct might be formed, or enduring – even while remaining cognisant of their potential co-optation and complexity.

In doing so, we brought Katie and China's stories forward, to appear alongside Daniel's cruelly concluded narrative that highlights the failure of his claims to the state, and the failure of 'old' forms of citizenship entitlement and state support that no longer ring true. This minor, or against the grain, reading suggests not only that the entitlements Daniel demands were never universal, and never available to *all* subjects in the first place, but also that their binding to cultural norms of respectability, morality, and legibility (Skeggs, 1997, 2004) persists in the ambivalence through which Katie and China's stories are framed in the film. At the same time, these stories suggest that alternative forms of survival, relational care, and refusal have *always* been accessed by some subjects as supplements to limited welfare state provision, and that Daniel's hesitation with them marks as much his own previously unquestioned attachment to imaginations of the state, as it does the other characters' refusal of them.

Abigail Scott Paul suggests in her review of *I, Daniel Blake* that 'a story about the will, drive and deservingness of people receiving benefits, only serves to entrench [the cultural poverty argument] and drive it deeper into public thinking and discourse' (2016). Similarly, we have remained suspicious that the political possibilities of this film might be limited by its centring of Daniel's ideal subjectivity and claim to fairness through citizenship-based entitlement, especially within the discursive conditions in which it is produced and viewed – the narrative economies of austerity. At the same time, we have maintained a *hopefulness* that the stories of Katie and China's practices of refusal can also have a life outside of the film, and that the relational care sustained and enacted by all the main characters is recognisable to the film's audiences. Finally, our reading hopes to sustain the urgency of attachments to a political imaginary in which the claims of all three characters, especially under austerity conditions that encourage them to *expect nothing*, can be held as legitimate and important.

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